



*Projects and Accountability...*

## **GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION IS DELIVERING**

Some three years ago, a seemingly never-ending series of studies, audits and reports criticized the Georgia Department of Transportation on a variety of fronts. Harsh comments made headlines across the state. Georgians were left to wonder if the DOT was an unaccountable, broken, unfixable bureaucracy.

It was a difficult time for the men and women of the Department, who were justifiably proud of the transportation system they had built and maintained – one of among America's best. Nonetheless, they committed to re-examine and revise, if needed, their processes and functions.

What did they find?

That despite the rhetoric, Georgia DOT remained fundamentally sound. Just as important, though, that some internal procedures and controls were outdated; could be sluggish; and weren't always emphasized. That DOT's best intentions often were beyond its available means. That, indeed, there was room for improvement.

Where do things stand now?

Very much improved.

The sternest criticism was that the Department ended Fiscal 2008 some \$450 million in debt – a contention many still believe was simply the result of a complicated accounting argument. Regardless, the same auditors who made that initial finding reported just a few weeks ago that the Department closed Fiscal 2010 with an \$800 million+ fund balance. That's a \$1.5 billion turnaround in two years.

Reports wondered if Georgia DOT could manage its work; if its projects weren't usually delivered late and over budget? Frankly, that contention had some merit. Improving project delivery and the construction process have since been distinct Department focal points. The results are telling:

- Aggressive efforts to speed up processes for buying right of way and beginning construction have led to 29% and 38% improvements, respectively.
- In 2010, the Department had 54 major projects (costs in excess of \$10 million) underway; 49 finished the year on budget.
- Twenty-one similar projects were completed and opened to traffic last year; 19 finishing within budget.
- 2010 saw the completion of more than a thousand DOT projects, spread throughout all of Georgia's 159 counties.

- Georgia DOT is one of 39 state transportation agencies to voluntarily submit itself to a national performance analysis. While evaluations continue, the Department ranks first in delivering projects on or below budget and second in delivering projects by their scheduled completion dates.

It also was recommended in 2008 the Department become more aggressive in maintaining quality control. The result - a broader application of the already existing DOT program called Value Engineering (VE), a sort of before-the-fact peer review of a project's design and construction plans. Since then, 173 VE studies have saved Georgia taxpayers more than \$725 million. Every dollar spent on VE in 2010 saved \$217.

Some in 2008 questioned the Department's ability to properly manage the \$900 million allocated to the state's transportation by the federal stimulus program? In reality, every federal deadline was met; every dollar properly obligated; and 401 projects are right now providing jobs and improving the condition, safety and capacity of roads and bridges throughout Georgia.

Substantial achievements, in my view.

I've been honored to serve as Commissioner of this Department for the past 20 months. We know our need to improve is a continuous, evolving process; that there's always more to learn and more we can do; that our duty to be responsible stewards of the public's transportation system and tax dollars remains forever. We realize our mission to improve safety and mobility in Georgia is ongoing.

*Vance C. Smith, Jr., is Commissioner of the Georgia Department of Transportation.*